Note from LMB: Like the earlier set, these were posts in support of the launch of *Passage*, the third volume of *The Sharing Knife* tetrology. The three-post series starts here: http://outofthiseos.typepad.com/blog/2008/04/guest-blogger-1.html

Eos Blog Posts for Passage, April 2008–Lois McMaster Bujold

Blog Post #1

One of the inevitable question any established writer gets hit with, almost as often as "Where do you get your ideas?", is "Which of your books is your own favorite?" The usual avoidance-strategy is to mumble something about "Oh, that would be like choosing among my children," and then, if the writer is quick on his or her feet, go on to list some good reasons why people should read *every one* of the writer's books.

I'm all for that last, but for the moment, at least, I really do have an answer: *The Sharing Knife* as a whole is my best-beloved book. A harder question is, *Why* do I love it so much, and so regret leaving its world?

The answer, I think, lies in its characters and setting, both of which are profoundly intertwined with each other, and with me. I've talked here and elsewhere about how Dag and Fawn's wide green world has its roots in my own childhood. (Post Five in this entry, http://www.dendarii.com/eosblog.html and here, http://www.dendarii.com/ohioana.html) I grow dry being cooped up in dark houses and cities, and love being outdoors in the light; in these books, I get outside a *lot*, at least in my imagination. The characters, too, integrate my past and my present, Dag with his experience of being in his mid-50's, with all the learning and loss that entails, Fawn with both my memories of my own semi-rural, lake-watered childhood and frustrating female youth, and my admiration of young women in my daughter's generation, who seem to be doing so much more than I did at that age. So it's only right that *TSK*'s over-arching theme turned out to be about the strengths and healing a whole society might achieve through integration: of past and present, of male and female, of youth and age, of technology and magic, of personal and political.

Passage is also, above all, a river story. My love of lakes was built into my bones in my own childhood, and had its say back in *Legacy*'s setting of Hickory Lake Camp. My love of mid-American rivers sits at one remove; they were my father's passion, not my own, but I had the chance to watch. A Pittsburgh native, half-orphaned through the early death of his own mother, my father's happiest childhood memories from the 1920's were of a community of summer cottages–I think we'd call them "shacks" today, or possibly "shanties"–on Twelve Mile Island, just upstream from the city, and

of his own father, for vacations, taking him and a canoe by train some two hundred miles up the Allegheny River, and spending a week or more paddling back down. I recently had a chance to read some of his journals he kept in his youth, and later in life; as a late teenager, he wrote that he couldn't decide if his life's ambition was to become an engineer, or to loaf on a houseboat. He eventually did both, although by his sixties when he finally acquired his houseboat, out of Cincinnati on the Ohio River, he had rather lost the knack of loafing. (He wrote better in his youth, too–too many years of academic papers had crippled his style.) At any rate, when I sent Dag and Fawn on their own journey of discovery down my wide green world's equivalent of the Ohio River, I had plenty of material to draw on, having both experienced the river first-hand, and inherited some of my Dad's library of river lore.

I'm finding it a little awkward talking about *TSK* at the moment, since I'm standing at the end looking over all four volumes, but the reader has only a partial view as yet. As what is in effect the middle volume of what would be a trilogy if the first big book hadn't been split in two, it's only right that *Passage*, like the river it follows, "flows from mystery above to mystery below," as Charles Edward Russell so memorably put it (a line I promptly stole for another young man who falls in love with rivers). But without what my characters–and I–learned along the way, what they do in the upcoming *Horizon* would not be possible.

As an adventure story, a love story, and a fantasy novel *Passage* stands well alone; what I may call the *argument* of the book arises more diffusely from the whole tetrology. Of which more in my third post, upcoming in a while.

Blog Post # 2.

A question of immediate practical concern for any reader confronted by a book with sequential numbers plastered on it–unless the sign says "Book One"–is, "Can I just pick this up and start reading, or do I have to read *X-1* other volumes first?"

Passage is Volume Three of a four-volume story, so that's a very legitimate question for both reader and writer. If I could draw it here, the *TSK* series structure would look like a row of four little arcs (the volumes) surmounted by two arcs (the two duologies, *Beguilement/Legacy* and *Passage/Horizon*) surmounted by one over-arching arc (the *TSK* series/tetrology as a whole). So by the time we reach *Passage*, we're well into a large and complex tale.

Nevertheless, being conscious of just this problem when I was writing the book, I did include what I hope is a reasonably smooth round-up of the most pertinent backstory pretty early on, woven into the beginning of events, for the benefit not only of new readers but of old readers whose memory of the first two books may be fading a bit. Not only that, but my protagonists Dag and Fawn go on to encounter new settings and a host of new characters (and new problems) that no reader has yet met.

So starting with *Passage* would not be as bad as, say, starting *The Lord of the Rings* with *The Two Towers*. It's not even as bad as my first encounter with that classic, at age fifteen, where I reached the end of *Fellowship* and mistakenly thought that was the end of the story, yeep! *Passage* is a considerably more rounded tale than that, and readers picking it up first should be able to get a quite satisfactory read from it. I am in fact looking forward to reader response from just that group.

Nevertheless, for the very spoiler-sensitive, *Passage* is inevitably full of big honking spoilers for the first two books. I also could not possibly recap all the layered subtleties of worldbuilding and subtext that have been built up in the prior two books in any space less than, well, the prior two books–all the dots that the readers are supposed to connect for themselves–although those aspects can be picked up later by the reader circling back (as I hope such readers will) and re-assembled in their heads.

Happily, the prior two volumes are readily available, in bookstores, libraries, and on the Net, in hardcover, paperback, e-book, audiobook, and if we could sky-write them, we'd likely do that, too. And you don't have to wait, nor wonder to yourself, "Gosh, would I enjoy this book, or not?" The first few chapters of the first volume, *Beguilement*, are here, free, right *here* on the other side of this link:

http://www.harpercollins.com/books/9780061137587/
The_Sharing_Knife_Volume_One/excerpt.aspx

Talking about books instead of reading them seems to me like talking about food instead of eating it. Here, go get a snack. I'll wait.

Blog Post #3.

I've had an interesting time playing with series structures in my fantasies for Eos, and working through the various kinds has made me very conscious of their differing strengths. In my earlier science fiction, I went with what I think of as the "Hornblower model": a collection of separate adventures all centering around a main character aging in something like real time, which, when put together, form the story of his life. It's a flexible, natural structure, also used heavily in mystery series. Its main internal advantage is how it allows, over many books, some pretty deep explorations of character growth and change. Its main external advantage is how it allows a reader to pick up a book about anywhere in the series and still get a complete read, although, as the pertinent backstory grew and grew, that became trickier for me. Its main disadvantage, for an SF or fantasy writer with entire universes and the depths of time to romp through, is the stories being constrained to such a modest segment of one's potential stage.

With the *Chalion* books, as they developed, I conceived the idea of a thematic series, with one independent tale for each of that world's five gods, which would allow me to move around more freely through time, setting, and character. I am at present three-fifths of the way through this plan, and I'm not sure when I'll get back to it, but the uncompleted pattern niggles. As a structure, this runs against both reader expectation set for fantasy epics that tell continuous tales, and one of the natural strengths of episodic stand-alone series, reader attachment to on-going characters. In addition, I have had to re-train my readership who, by repeated conditioning, had expected more of my former series pattern, which, for all its merits, had grown dangerously close to being locked-in.

With the *Sharing Knife* books–or Book–I set myself free to explore yet another pattern, the single big story spread over several volumes. This again has required some adjustment from my readership. This actually wasn't quite what I'd started out to do–in the beginning, what I actually wanted was to see what would happen if I set a romance as the main plot of a fantasy novel, genuine genre-blending.

This turned out to be a lot trickier than I thought, once I got into it, and not just because some F&SF readers failed to recognize a romance as fit material for a plot, or even as a plot at all. In the cross-overs I had read by other writers, it seemed to me that the romance crowd tended to stint the world-building–it didn't always seem to go all the way to the edge of the page–and the skiffy writers in turn didn't deliver on the emotions of the romance. What I discovered in the writing was that the two genres had profoundly different focal planes for their tales, to steal a metaphor from photography, which may be shorthanded as "personal versus political."

I expected to learn a lot about romance through writing one, and I did. I was more surprised to learn something new about F&SF–which is how profoundly, intensely, relentlessly *political* most of the stories in these genres are. The politics may be archaic or modern, fringe or realistic, naive or subtle, optimistic or dire, but by gum the characters had better be centrally engaged with them, for some extremely varied values of "engaged."

Even the world-building itself is often a political argument. I had not noticed this the way a fish does not notice water; only when I'd stepped onto the shore of the neighboring genre and breathed air did I discover there even could be a difference–and what a difference it was.

In fact, if romances are fantasies of love, and mysteries are fantasies of justice, I would now describe most F&SF as fantasies of political agency. All three also may embody themes of personal psychological empowerment, of course, though often very different in the details, as contrasted by the way the heroines "win" in romances, the way detectives "win" in mysteries, and the way, say, young male characters "win" in adventure tales.

In any case, to satisfy both sets of readerly demands I ended up by somewhat dividing the personal and the political parts of the plot, tightly braided as they are, between the two succeeding duologies. The first two books emphasize the personal side in the courtship-story of Dag and Fawn, even while the characters themselves embody the main cultural conflict of the books. This sets the essential foundation for the second pair of volumes, where the focus turns more outward. If the first pair of books may be described as the formation of a couple from two separate and unlikely people, the second pair builds a family, of a sort, from even more disparate elements, and eventually, in *Horizon* (due out Feb. '09), a community from a wider pool still. (I'll have more to say about the political/personal argument of the books when *Horizon* comes out.)

Most of all *The Sharing Knife* as a whole does not have a villain-driven plot, fun and cathartic as those can be. (I know: I've written a boatload of them.) I set Dag and Fawn to wrestle with a much more difficult and diffuse problem, not of merely destroying the villain *du jour*, but of building connections and friendships and fresh ways of doing things that will allow both their peoples to meet the challenge of many new dangers in the future. Building is harder than destroying. "Winning" in the usual sense is not what's going on, here, but the prize is certainly their world.

[Another note from LMB: Eos also asked for a shorter squib for their YA blog.]

YA Post

Passage is an adventure story, a love story, and a fantasy novel, but above all, it is a river journey. In it, newly-married farmer girl Fawn Bluefield and her Lakewalker sorcerer-soldier husband Dag take passage on a flatboat to the sea, seeking solutions to the dangerous split between their peoples. (Though finding, among other things, river pirates.)

My love of lakes grew from my own childhood, but my father's happiest youthful memories were from the 1920's at summer cottages–I think we'd call them "shanties" today–on a river island just upstream from Pittsburgh. His own father, for vacations, would take him and a canoe by train some two hundred miles up the Allegheny River, and spend a week or more paddling back down. I recently had a chance to read some of his journals he kept in his youth; as a late teenager, he wrote that he couldn't decide if his life's ambition was to become an engineer, or to loaf on a houseboat. He eventually did both, although by his sixties when he finally acquired his houseboat on the Ohio River, he had rather lost the knack of loafing. So when I sent Dag and Fawn on their own journey of discovery down my book's equivalent of the Ohio, I had plenty of material, having both experienced the river first-hand, and inherited my Dad's library of river lore.

American landscapes are often neglected as sources for fantasy settings. Can you imagine, fifty years in the future, what tales of your parents' time you would tell to your grandchildren? What parts do you think they would find utterly alien or fantastical?